

Notice of Proposed Action

Divide Peak Habitat Improvement Project

Brush Creek-Hayden Ranger District, Medicine Bow – Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin
National Grassland

Carbon County, WY

T14N R85W Sections 5- 8, T14N R86W Sections 1- 6, 8-12, 14, 15, T15N R85W Sections 6, 7, 17-20, 28-33, T15N R86W, T15N R87W Sections 1-7, 9-17, 20-27, 35, 36, T16N R.86W Sections 26-36, T16N R87W Sections 14, 15, 21-36

Comments Welcome

The Brush Creek-Hayden Ranger (BCH) District of the Routt National Forest welcomes your comments on the *Divide Peak Habitat Improvement Project* proposal. Your comments will help determine if this proposal falls within a category of actions per 36 CFR 220 that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Instructions for submitting comments are described on the last page.

Background

Considerable past survey work and analysis has been completed within the analysis area and for the specific proposed action described below. The proposed action was originally part of the cancelled Savery project and is being carried forward as an individual project. There are no other associated proposed actions or activities.

The preliminary assessment is that this proposal falls within a category of actions per 36 CFR 220 that are excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS as there are no extraordinary circumstances that would preclude use of the category *36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) – Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to improve wildlife habitat and lower fuel loads to reduce fire hazards. The age distribution of the fire-adapted, shrubland and aspen/mixed conifer plant communities in the Divide Peak area has become highly uniform. This is a direct result of past fire suppression efforts.

There is a need to re-introduce fire through prescribed burns to improve age class distribution. This will, in turn, improve wildlife habitat diversity and reduce surface fuel loading and arrangement, and thus future fire hazard.

Analysis Area

The Divide Peak Habitat Improvement Project Analysis Area (AA) is located in Carbon County, Wyoming. The legal description is T14N R85W Sections 5- 8, T14N R86W Sections 1- 6, 8-12, 14, 15, T15N R85W Sections 6, 7, 17-20, 28-33, T15N R86W, T15N R87W Sections 1-7, 9-17, 20-27, 35, 36, T16N R.86W Sections 26-36, & T16N R87W Sections 14, 15, 21-36. The AA encompasses approximately 57,892 acres, including 55,884 acres of National Forest System lands (96.5%) and 2,008 acres (3.5%) of non-NFS lands. There are no proposed actions associated with non-NFS lands.

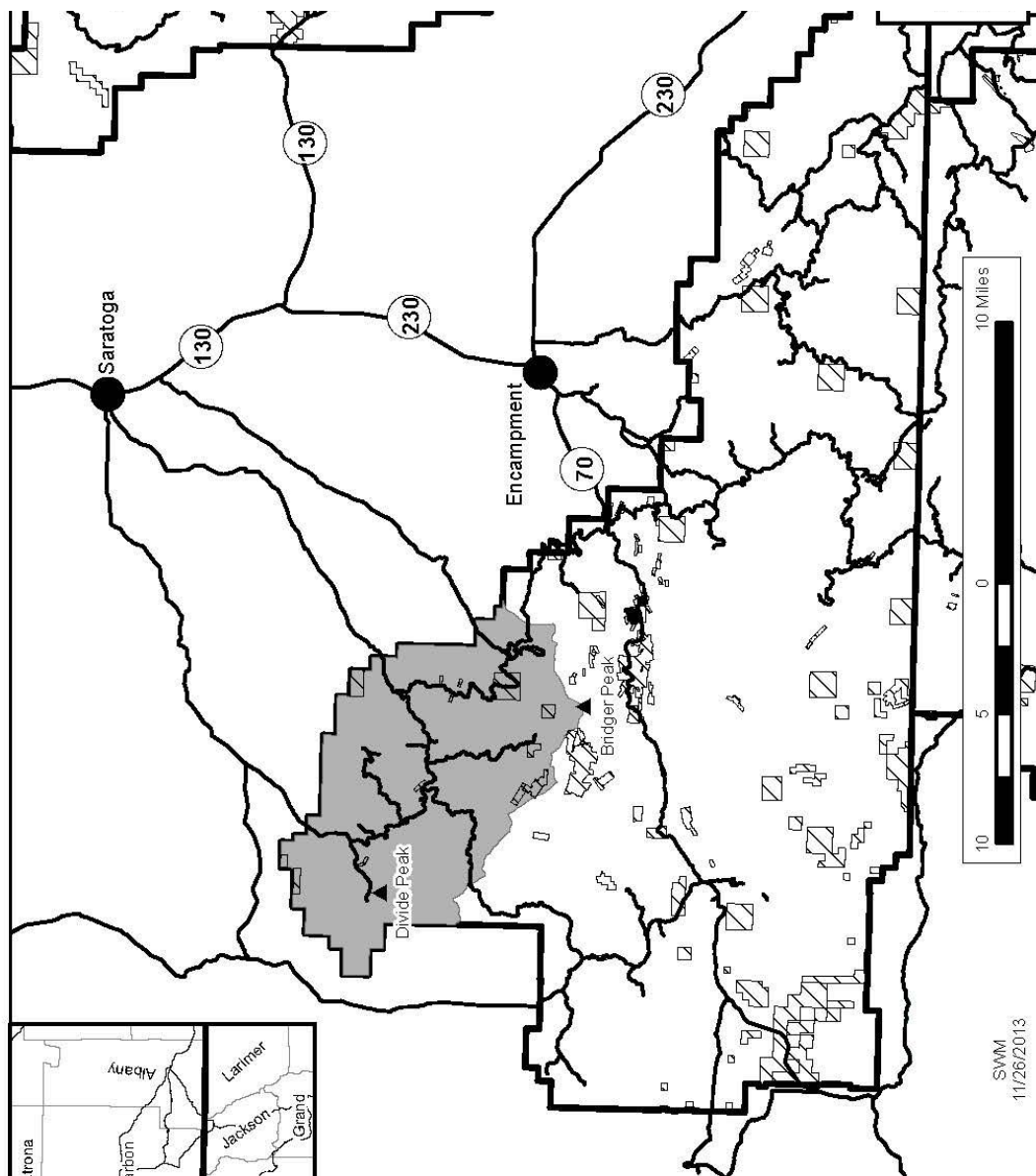
Table 1 list management areas within the AA and the amount of potential disturbed area associated with the proposed actions. Figure 1 on the following page identifies the limits and location of the AA.

Table 1: Management Areas (MA) within the project area.

Management Area	Acres in Analysis Area	# Acres Proposed for Treatment
3.31 – Backcountry Recreation, Year-round Motorized	3,653.5	
3.5 – Forested Flora or Fauna Habitats, Limited Snowmobiling	3,136.6	147.3
5.12 – General Forest and Rangelands, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis	10,233.8	886.1
5.13 – Forest Projects	38,770.9	625.1
5.15 – Forest Products, ecological maintenance and Restoration Considering the Historic Range of Variability	2.9	
8.21 – Developed Recreation	27.2	
8.6 – Administrative Sites	59.2	
Private Land	2,008.1	
TOTAL	57,892.2	1,658.6

**Note: Unit pertinent acres are displayed in 1/10th of an acre. Slight rounding may occur throughout the analysis and implementation.*

Figure 1: Project A



Proposed Action

Prescribed burning will target both shrubland and mixed conifer/aspen communities for a total of approximately 1,658 acres (1,236 shrubland and 422 aspen/mixed conifer), located in 37 separate burn polygons, which includes both primary and secondary burn units. This represents 2.9% of the entire project area. Primary burn units identify where fires will be ignited. Secondary burn units are adjacent to primary locations but fires will not be ignited in those areas. If a fire that started in primary area that spreads into a secondary area it will not be suppressed.

The shrublands will be treated using prescribed burning with emphasis on creating a mosaic where approximately 30 to 60 percent of the unit acres are burned. These will be spring burns and the result will be an increased age class distribution of the shrubs in the treatment units as well as reduced fire hazard.

The shrubland communities targeted for burning are primarily mountain big sagebrush, bitterbrush, with minor amounts of serviceberry and choke cherry. Since this burning is planned for the spring, the aspen and surrounding conifer will be holding snow and/or have a high enough duff and fine fuel moisture content that they would not support a surface fire which means that no mechanical fireline would need to be constructed. Burning would target primarily the sagebrush, bitterbrush, serviceberry, and choke cherry where these latter two species are present. The goals of the broadcast burning are: (1) to improve age class distribution in the shrubland communities, (2) to improve wildlife habitat diversity and (3) reduce fire hazard by reducing fuel loading.

Aspen stands are usually considered “fire safe” and are desired from a fire suppression & operations perspective. The conifer encroached aspen stands will be treated by prescribed burning with emphasis on creating mortality in the conifer and standing aspen trees (a coppice treatment accomplished by prescribed fire). The result will be regenerated aspen stands/clones with the competing conifer removed. There is also an additional benefit of reduced fire hazard in the treated areas. The conifer/aspen stands will be burned in late spring, when the dead surface fuels in the conifer stands have sufficiently dried out and adjacent shrublands are expected to be under green-up, or late in the fall. No mechanical lines are expected to be required. Burning of aspen/conifer polygons 21 and 25 will be implemented along with adjacent BLM lands and burning is dependent on the BLM completing their NEPA process.

Prescribed burns will be conducted in the spring to ensure that the surrounding aspen and conifer stands will be holding snow and/or have sufficient duff and fine fuel moisture that they will not support a surface fire. This will prevent the need to construct any mechanical fireline and reduce potential site disturbances.

The emphasis will be on creating a mosaic burn pattern where approximately 30% to 60% of the acres within each unit are burned. The shrubland communities targeted for prescribed burning are primarily mountain big sagebrush and bitterbrush, with minor amounts of serviceberry and choke cherry.

Approximately 8.9% of the acres within the proposed prescribed burn units (147.3 acres) are in the Strawberry Creek Roadless Area. No treatments are proposed on private land inholdings within the project area.

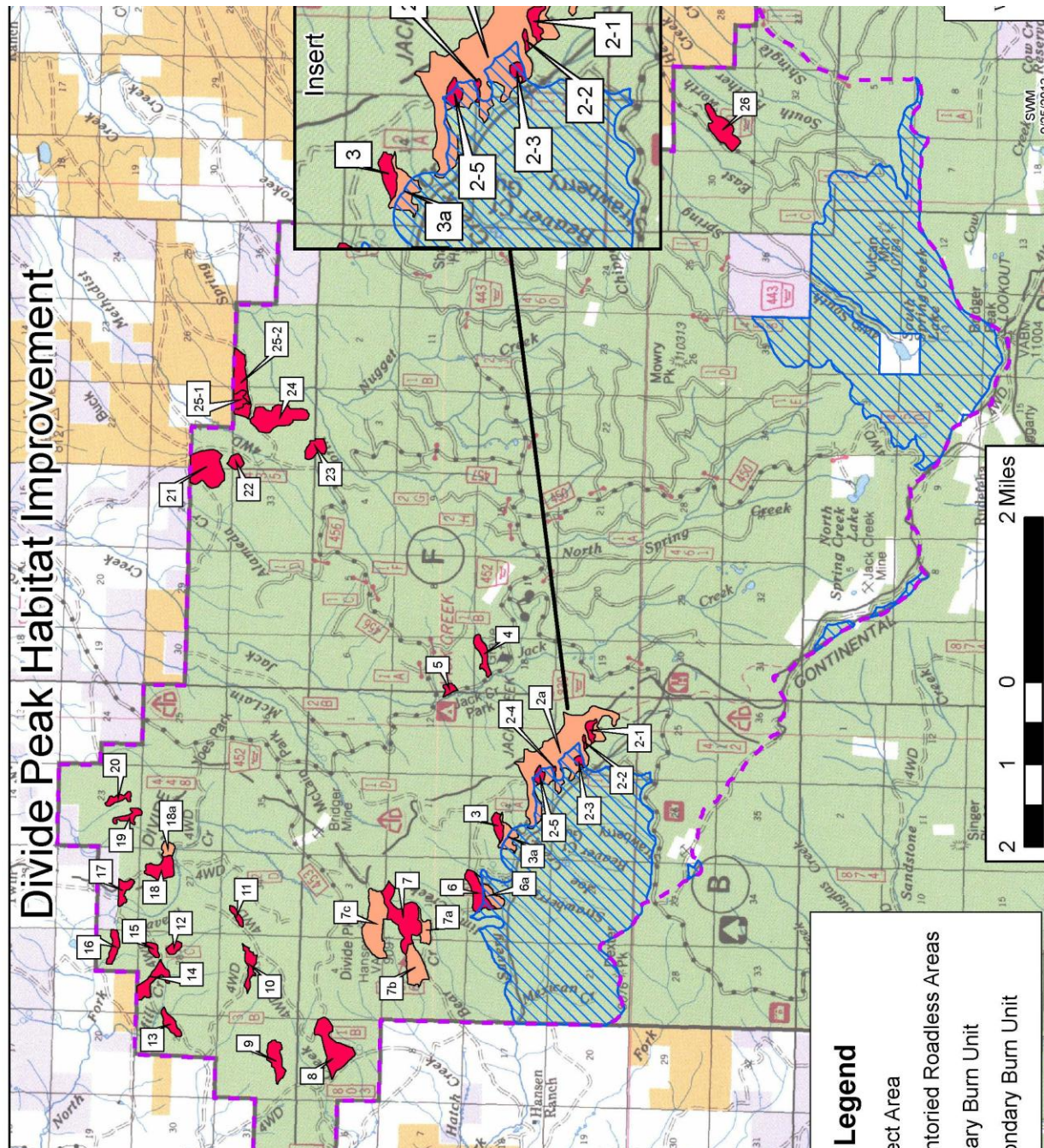
The prescribed burns would be implemented under the guidelines of an approved Prescribed Fire Burn Plan and smoke/emissions generated would follow Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality requirements.

Table 2: Proposed Actions

PRESCRIBED BURN AREA	Acres	Type	ROADLESS AREA	ACRES WITHIN ROADLESS
2-1	13.4	Primary		
2-2	3.2	Primary		
2-3	7.8	Primary	Strawberry Creek	7.7
2-4	3.2	Primary	Strawberry Creek	0.6
2-5	12.3	Primary	Strawberry Creek	8.8
2a	355.2	Secondary	Strawberry Creek	76.5
3	19.9	Primary		
3a	32.8	Secondary	Strawberry Creek	18.1
4	28.5	Primary		
5	10.0	Primary		
6	50.6	Primary	Strawberry Creek	11.0
6a	27.8	Secondary	Strawberry Creek	24.6
7	108.3	Primary		
7a	23.3	Secondary		
7b	58.1	Secondary		
7c	110.9	Secondary		
8	93.1	Primary		
9	42.6	Primary		
10	27.7	Primary		
11	10.5	Primary		
12	12.9	Primary		
13	23.6	Primary		
14	43.9	Primary		
15	11.4	Primary		
16	23.4	Primary		
17	22.1	Primary		
18	43.8	Primary		
18a	14.9	Secondary		
19	18.7	Primary		
20	16.1	Primary		
21	100.2	Primary		
22	16.7	Primary		
23	28.1	Primary		
24	95.3	Primary		
25-1	17.7	Primary		
25-2	64.8	Primary		
26	65.9	Primary		
TOTAL	1,658.6			147.3

**Note: Unit pertinent acres are displayed in 1/10th of an acre. Slight rounding may occur throughout the analysis and implementation.*

Figure 2: Loc



Management Direction

The proposed action aligns with goals, objectives, and strategies from the 2003 Medicine Bow National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) specifically;

- Forest Goal 1: Promote ecosystem health and conservation using a collaborative approach to sustain the Nation's forests, grasslands, and watershed (p. 1-2 thru 1-6).
 - Subgoal 1.b: Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired on-native species.

- Objective 1: Over the life of the plan, move terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian composition, structure, patterns, and processes toward conditions typical of those created by natural process.
- Desired condition for the Battle Creek (p. 3-32 thru 3-34), Northeast Sierra Madre (p. 3-40 thru 3-42), and North Savery (p. 3-43 thru 3-45) Geographic Areas.
- Management Area Prescriptions (Chapter 2).

The proposed actions are consistent with the 2001 Roadless Rule as no road construction or tree cutting are proposed. This project was reviewed and approved for public scoping/comment by the Rocky Mountain Regional Office on December 3, 2013. This project will be reviewed by the Rocky Mountain Regional Office for compliance with the 2001 Roadless Rule prior to any decision being authorized.

The project will be designed to conform to the Forest Plan and all other laws, regulations and policies. Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be applied as appropriate to meet Forest Plan goals and desired conditions.

Nature of Decision to be Made

For this project, the responsible official is the BCH District Ranger. Given the purpose and need, the responsible official will review the analysis of the proposed action and any public comments in order to make the following decisions:

- If the proposal falls within a category of actions per 36 CFR 220 that are excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS and there are no extraordinary circumstances
- Treatment units to be implemented
- Determine what design criteria, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements are to be incorporated

Public Involvement

This is the first and only opportunity for the public to provide comment for Divide Peak Habitat Improvement project. The project was first listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on November 26, 2013 and updates are provided quarterly. As additional information becomes available it can be found on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest and Thunder Basin National Grassland website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr/projects/trans/index.shtml>

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

There are no alternatives to the proposed action. The proposed action will either be implemented in full, part, or not at all. The project analysis could be elevated to an EA if extraordinary circumstances are identified.

Effects and Issues to Consider

The analysis will address the effects of the proposed action to the following resources:

- Botany
- Fire/Fuels
- Fisheries
- Heritage
- Hydrology
- Range
- Recreation
- Soils
- Wildlife

The assessment will be issue-driven and contain detail commensurate to the degree to which a resource may be affected. Issues are unresolved conflicts that arise as a result of the proposed action. The Forest Service identified the following issues from input under the original Savery project: sensitive botany locations have been identified and removed from the proposal.

Other issues raised through further field analysis or in response to this notice of proposed action will be considered and addressed. Some issues may be addressed through modification of the proposed action, design criteria, or mitigation measures.

Comment Process

This comment period coincides with public scoping and will be the only comment opportunity offered on this project (see 36 CFR 215.5 and 215.6). This comment period is intended to provide those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to comment on the proposed action before the Responsible Official makes a decision.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Rawlins Daily Times. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted via mail, fax, electronically, or in person (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays) to: Mick Hood, District FMO, USDA Forest Service, 2171 S HWY 130, PO Box 249, Saratoga, WY 82331. Electronic comments including attachments can be submitted to: comments-rm-medicine-bow-routt-brush-creek-hayden@fs.fed.us. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

Persons commenting should include: 1) name, address, telephone number, organization represented, if any; 2) title of this project: *Divide Peak Habitat Improvement Project*; and 3) specific facts and supporting reasons for consideration.

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only individuals or organizations that submit comments during the comment

period are eligible to appeal the decision for the project for which the comment is submitted. Appeal procedures and eligibility requirements are defined in 36 CFR 215.

This NOPA is also requesting your comments under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (NHPA). Consultation under the NHPA seeks to consider the views about an undertaking and its effects on historic properties for the agency official to consider in decision making (36 CFR 800).

To request further information, please contact Mick Hood, District FMO, USDA Forest Service, 2171 S HWY 130, PO Box 249, Saratoga, WY 82331, (307) 326-2517, mhood@fs.fed.us.

Implementation

Once the NEPA analysis is completed a decision whether or not to implement the proposed action is anticipated by March 2014. If no significant issues are identified by the public or Forest Service specialists, the Forest Service proposes to begin implementing this project during Spring, 2014.

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data it has available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be: developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, have represented features not in accurate geographic locations, etc. The Forest Service makes no expressed or implied warranty, including warranty of merchantability and fitness, with respect to the character, function, or capabilities of the data or their appropriateness for any user's purposes. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this geospatial information based on new inventories, new or revised information, and if necessary in conjunction with other federal, state or local public agencies or the public in general as required by policy or regulation. Previous recipients of the products may not be notified unless required by policy or regulation. For more information, contact the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland Supervisor's Office (2468 Jackson Street, Laramie, WY 82070, 307-745-2300).

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